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Book Review: Daniel M. Bell, Jr., Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State

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From his conversations in church settings and classrooms, Daniel M. Bell, Jr. has observed that Christians by and large do not know the church's just war tradition very well, but that they are receptive to learning about it. Most theologians would likely agree that they know a number of Christians who are hungry to see better thinking and more effective action in response to war in our time. Bell, a Lutheran seminary professor and ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, wrote this book to interpret 'the just war tradition in terms of concrete practices that might contribute to the church's ability to make faithful moral judgments regarding justice in war then live out those judgments' (p. 15). This project is needed, he thinks, because a public-policy mode of just war reasoning has eclipsed a church-based mode, even among Christians.

Bell's contrast of these two approaches frames this book. The dominant method is 'just war as public policy checklist', abbreviated by Bell to Just War PPC. This vision of just war 'has as its starting point... modern nation-states and international law'; it 'thinks primarily in terms of the laws and rules that do and/or should regulate the behavior of modern-nation states in war'; and it is a 'decidedly secular' vision (p. 74). Just War PPC is the familiar, popular version: a set

of principles that need to be satisfied for a war to be supposedly just; a checklist that leaders and op-ed writers can run down when making their case for or against an instance of military action. By contrast, just war as Christian discipleship is ‘an expression of the character of the Christian community; an outgrowth of its fundamental confessions, convictions, and practices; and an extension of its consistent day-to-day life and work on behalf of justice and love of neighbor (even enemies) in the time and realm of war’ (p. 74). Just War CD is a demanding discipline and a form of witness rooted in community, character, and spirituality.

This basic distinction is a fruitful insight that can win Bell a hearing from readers of many persuasions. Almost all people—whether supporters or critics of just war—discern that one of the great weaknesses of the theory is the way that anyone can use it rhetorically to rationalize any result that he or she wants. The checklist method is too abstract and too prone to abuse. Bell uses a dental metaphor to characterize the flaws of the checklist approach (pp. 90–94). Just war can be used ‘with no teeth’ when people pay mere lip service to the tradition’s demands or ‘with a few teeth pulled’ when they pick and choose among its criteria. A related problem is when the checklist is interpreted so rigidly that it has ‘too many teeth’ and virtually no war can pass muster. Bell would say that such a near-pacifism does not fit with Augustine’s interpretation of war as a ‘harsh kindness’ that can be a service of love to others and to the common good (p. 31). Instead, Bell favours just war ‘with all its teeth’, which means that all the criteria are used without a hierarchy among them (p. 94). The burden of this book is to argue that Just War CD is the form of the tradition that best achieves this goal.

Bell proceeds by summarizing the history of the just war tradition over the first two chapters, highlighting the contributions of Augustine, Aquinas, and Vitoria. In addition to offering a serviceable historical overview, Bell makes two arguments. First, he disputes the way

of looking at war as a 'lesser evil' in favour of Augustine's interpretation of war as a service of love. Second, he charts the problems that infiltrate the just war tradition under the secularizing influence of international law. Then, after a central chapter contrasting the two approaches, Bell works his way through the just war criteria. Each chapter explains a just war criterion, analyzes the similarities and differences in the approaches of Just War CD and Just War PPC regarding the criterion, and reflects on the challenges that Just War CD poses to the church.

This book has significant value for its challenge to the PPC approach, which indeed is often abused. As a normative project, the Just War CD interpretation indeed restores teeth to several criteria. Right intent, which has been eviscerated in PPC, is refocused on the intentions to achieve peace, to do complete justice, and to love one's neighbours, including one's enemies. Last resort in the CD approach puts much more effort into developing alternatives to war than does the PPC approach. Proportionality under CD holds that militaries should use the minimum force needed, while the PPC interpretation allows the maximum force necessary. Bell makes substantive, persuasive arguments on these points among others. In addition, Just War CD restores balance among all of the criteria. In this connection, Bell makes an elegant response to the debate over the presumption against war: the felt need to add such a presumption to the just war criteria reflect the lack of confidence that theorists have in the checklist approach. Just War CD makes the criteria themselves 'adequate to the task of appropriately guiding our disposition toward entering into war' (p. 89).

Of course, as with virtually all heuristic devices, these categories should not be drawn too sharply. What Bell really has his finger on is a spectrum with two sides. An interpretation of just war by a certain theologian or a use of just war by a certain denomination will reflect one side of the spectrum or the other, to a greater or lesser degree. Bell rightly acknowledges that on a

number of issues and applications, the two just war perspectives *do not* disagree. But Bell overlooks the value of being able to employ both sides of the just war spectrum. For instance, he very briefly mentions the bold witness of the Roman Catholic Church against the Iraq War. Bell could go further and explore how the Catholic Church in recent decades has reflected the CD approach better than most Christian denominations, while building effective public policy reasoning upon a theological-ecclesial foundation.

However, the Catholic Church and many Christian churches fall short at the parish level, where too few substantive discussions of war and peace occur. Christian reflection on war often fails to engage local Christian communities, so Bell does well to take the church seriously as a location of discernment, prayer, and action. He raises sober questions about discipleship, such as, ‘How much are we willing to risk in order to follow Christ in loving our enemies?’ and answers, ‘I suspect that... left to our own devices and relying on our own willpower, we would risk very little’ (p. 235). Yet, fortunately, Christians are not left to their individual resources; they can and should rely on the Christian community and on faith in Christ. Along these lines, the final section of each chapter offers general suggestions for how the church should reflect and act from a Just War CD perspective.

Refreshing though this ecclesial focus is, these sections bring to light a shortcoming of the book—or at least they suggest the unfinished promise of Bell’s project. The book’s biggest problem is lack of specificity and examples. Bell starts the introduction with several specific questions that inspire him and other Christians to think about war, such as ‘Was the invasion of Afghanistan just?’ (p. 13). But at the end of the book the reader is still hard-pressed to figure out how he would answer these specific questions. To be fair, Bell is doing theological analysis rather than applied ethics, and his approach is one that questions the value of giving pat answers

to such questions. Yet war is a topic that thrives on examples, and Bell obviously wants to see concrete, active responses to the moral problems posed by war. The problem is not that he offers no examples, but that he consistently uses general ones that almost never mention a specific military conflict.

As an example, consider his ten-page ‘challenges for the church’ section of the chapter on legitimate authority. The four recommendations that he gives for the church are to support good leaders, to form faithful disciples, to reassert church authority, and to gather good information. His way of explaining these recommendations is to raise pointed, rhetorical questions (similar to the ‘are we willing to risk?’ question quoted above) and then to offer theological reflection and encouragement in a style that can be characterized as sometimes ethical and sometimes sermonic. The shortcoming is that these provocative questions and general suggestions only begin to launch his ‘recentering’ project. Obviously, Bell cannot predict or dictate the direction that such discussions should take in the churches, but he leaves a number of tantalizing issues hanging, including the matters of where he sees such church-based discernment happening right now and what it would take to get more Christian communities involved. One could also fairly expect that the ecclesiological section of a chapter on legitimate authority discuss how American and British church bodies challenged or failed to challenge the Bush and Blair administrations over the invasion of Iraq.

In the course of these same ten pages, Bell makes three slightly more specific ethical recommendations: that selective conscience objection be allowed, that the state share appropriate military information with the church so that the church could render better advice, and that the church rethink the role of military chaplains to ensure that they have sufficient independence from the military. These are all important topics to raise, but none is developed—indeed, the

puzzling second recommendation requires explication and defence. Given that there are sections of five chapters as well as a conclusion in which Bell discusses challenges to the church, one might expect a cumulative result of more specificity on the role of the church.

Nevertheless, Bell has commenced an important project. The scholars who wrote blurbs for the book are correct that Bell's framework breathes fresh life into discussions of just war. The book is conceptually robust such that it should be read by scholars and advanced students; it is also accessible to beginning students and a general readership in the churches. All readers will look forward to future work from Bell that develops the ethical and ecclesiological applications of just war as Christian discipleship. The intriguing foreword to the book penned by U.S. Army chaplain Lt. Col. Scott A. Sterling suggests the promise of projects that gather more voices from soldiers and chaplains who are wrestling faithfully with ethical and theological questions in their military service.